

## Knowledge transfer and organizational memory: an events perspective

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### **Knowledge Transfer and Organizational Memory: An Events Perspective**

#### **Abstract**

Although there is substantial research on various elements of knowledge management in organizations, there is a gap in our understanding of how event organizations transfer knowledge. We address this gap, using qualitative interview data and show in our results that knowledge transfer processes can be categorized into three distinct phases: i) *pre-event*, ii) *event-operations* and iii) *post-event*. Event managers and staff mostly transfer explicit knowledge *pre-event*; yet, tacit knowledge is transferred during the *event-operations*. Tacit knowledge however, is rarely converted into explicit knowledge in the *post-event* phase, and organizational memory is largely underutilised. Practical implications are deduced, suggesting for event organizations, to adopt a more strategic approach to knowledge transfer. We suggest that event management then operates more effectively in this fast-paced and knowledge intensive business environment, and better integrates heterogeneous event staff, including both paid employees and event volunteers.

*Key words:* Knowledge Transfer, Volunteers, Tacit Knowledge, Organizational Memory, Event Organizations

## Introduction

Knowledge transfer is a key element of a firms' strategic management, as a key success factor it increases both organizational performance and effectiveness (Argote, 2013; DeNisi, Hitt, & Jackson, 2003; Kogut & Zander, 1992; Mitton, Adair, McKenzie, Patten, & Perry, 2007; Olivera, 2000; Tsai, 2001; Zack, McKeen, & Singh, 2009). Successfully transferring knowledge leads to higher innovation, improved processes and practices, and a more comprehensive overview of the entire firm's strategy (Mäkelä & Brewster, 2009). Knowledge transfer is based on organizational learning theory and defined as a cumulative and on-going process (Borgatti & Carboni, 2007), yet the effectiveness of knowledge transfer methods is complex and needs to be better understood (Szulanski, Ringov, & Jensen, 2016).

Organizational memory is the result of an organization's learning process; it is the place where information is stored until it is retrieved and processed as new knowledge (Levitt & March, 1988; Walsh & Ungson, 1991). Management of organizational memory is an essential component for managing knowledge transfer effectively, and includes the processes of acquisition and retrieval, as well as the actual location storage of the information (Walsh & Ungson, 1991). An awareness of the significance of organisational memory, and clear strategies for the management of its use/dissemination/something are essential as it affects the firm's overall success (Chang & Cho, 2008; Rowlinson, Booth, Clark, Delahaye, & Procter, 2010; Walsh & Ungson, 1991).

Less is known, however, of the processes that enable knowledge transfer within event organizers, how information is stored in organizational memories, and how it is accessed in the fast-paced event environment. Even though Robinson and Minikin (2012) gave some insights on knowledge transfer processes of mega-events, there is still little understanding about knowledge transfer in events, that answer questions how different types of staff work together over a very short period of time. Event teams are often very heterogeneous. Thus, the different motivations of staff might impact ability and behavior in knowledge transfer (Johnston, Twynam, & Farrell, 1999; Van der Wagen & White, 2014). Parent and MacIntosh (2013) point out that event teams are usually temporary organizations with fixed deadlines structuring their existence. Event teams, for example, might consist of paid on-going staff, paid casual staff and volunteers, who all have different expectations in relation to working at the event. Volunteers, who often contribute substantially to

event operations, might expect either social or career benefits, while others may be driven by work-autonomy (Allen & Bartle, 2014; Treuen, 2014).

As the event industry takes a higher profile in destinations' strategic plans and becomes economically very important (Getz, 2008; Yeoman, Robertson, Ali-Knight, Drummond, & McMahon-Beattie, 2012), it is vital to understand that relevance of strategic management for event organizations. It is necessary to explore processes and behavior on a deeper level and conduct research on the enabling factors for an event organization's success. However, so far there is limited discussion about context-specific organisational processes, behaviors and characteristics of event organizations. Mair and Whitford (2013) note that most event research has so far focussed on definitions and types of events, on events logistics, and less on strategic management issues. Examining this strategic issue of knowledge transfer is especially significant as events contribute substantially to both the economic and social wellbeing of local communities (Fredline, Deery, & Jago, 2013).

Hence, the aim of this exploratory qualitative research is to provide insights into how event organizations transfer knowledge and to identify drivers that foster knowledge transfer. We propose that a deeper understanding of knowledge transfer processes is needed to understand event contributions. Identifying these knowledge transfer processes is important as the work environment of event organizations is different compared to that of other industry sectors (Allen, O'Toole, Harris, & McDonnell, 2011; Tum & Norton, 2006; Van der Wagen & White, 2010; 2014; Wrathall & Gee, 2011; Yeoman et al., 2012). For instance, event organizations' external environment is complex, uncertain and unpredictable (Allen et al., 2011; Yeoman et al., 2012). Yet, operations are bound to strict deadlines and structures (Parent & MacIntosh, 2013). Further, team composition is very heterogeneous in terms of contract forms and work motivation (Allen & Bartle, 2014; Hobday, 2000; Van der Wagen & White, 2010). In those temporary teams, knowledge transfer is often difficult and knowledge may not be passed on due to the fast-paced, project-bound nature (Bartsch, Ebers, & Maurer, 2013).

With this aim, the paper first discusses the theoretical framework with a focus on the knowledge transfer process in general, and specifically in event organizations. The paper investigates knowledge transfer processes that take place both between event organizers and event staff, as well as amongst event staff, including as paid event staff and volunteers. The paper provides the research

design, which is followed by a discussion of the findings. This section uses the product life cycle as a framework for the discussion of knowledge transfer prior to, during and following the event. Findings include a discussion of the innovation in knowledge transfer. The paper then provides implications for industry, the limitations of the study, future research and a final summary.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***The Process of Knowledge Transfer***

*Knowledge transfer* is a key dimension of organizational learning (Argote, 2013; Argote & Ingram, 2000; Garvin, 2000; Goh, 2002; Szulanski, 2000). So far however, there is still little agreement on the definitions, processes, and models in this field (Lundberg, 1995; Zheng, Yang, & McLean, 2010), and the terms ‘knowledge sharing’, ‘knowledge transfer’ and ‘knowledge diffusion’ are used interchangeably (Zheng et al., 2010). For the purpose of this paper, we will refer to the term ‘knowledge transfer’, and use the organization’s ability to interchange knowledge (Goh, 2002), leading to higher organizational effectiveness (Olivera, 2000; Petrash, 1996). Researchers often conceptualize knowledge transfer within a process framework of organizational learning, assuming cumulative and on-going development (Borgatti & Carboni, 2007).

The concept of *organizational learning* views the organization as an open system, interpreting its external environment, and in that way adopting and transforming itself (Argote, 2013; Argyris, 1999; Daft & Weick, 1984). The start of an organization’s learning process is triggered by the diffusion of an individual’s knowledge. The individual’s knowledge is spread and communicated towards groups and teams, and further shared with, and absorbed by, the entire organization. The sharing and transferring of knowledge enables the organization’s learning, and this learning can progress competence building processes (Borgatti & Carboni, 2007). This view is theoretically framed by the knowledge-based theory of organizations that suggests that “knowledge is viewed as residing within the individual, and the primary role of the organization is knowledge application rather than knowledge creation” (Grant, 1996, p. 109).

*Organizational memory* is the ideal output of the organization's learning process. Information is stored until retrieved and processed again (Levitt & March, 1988). Organizational memory "is composed of the structure of its retention facility, the information contained in it, the processes of information acquisition and retrieval, and its consequential effects" (Walsh & Ungson, 1991, p. 61). The information stored consists of individual memories – including experiences, beliefs, routines and tangible artefacts (Levitt & March, 1988; Moorman & Miner, 1998). Most of the studies conceptualising organizational memory utilise Walsh and Ungson's 'repository image' or 'storage bin model' to visualise the memory (Rowlinson et al., 2010). The physical location is the firm's data system as well as the individual employee memory. Organizational memory includes

*documents, accounts, files, standard operating procedures, and rule books; in the social and physical geography of organizational structures and relationships; in standards of good professional practice; in the culture of organizational stories; and in shared perceptions of 'the way things are done around here* (Levitt & March, 1988, p. 237).

Once the information has been stored it is further able to be retrieved from the organizational memory, then interpreted and utilised for specific purposes and converted into meaningful information: knowledge (Bhatt, 2001). To effectively manage an organization's memory, Walsh and Ungson (1991, p. 61) suggest that managers need to reflect upon "who, what, when, where, why and how is information stored?" A well-managed organizational memory contributes to organizational success (Chang & Cho, 2008). For instance, it positively influences decision-making in firms (Rowlinson et al., 2010).

The prevailing view is to describe knowledge as either *tacit* or *explicit* (Ipe, 2003). Generally explicit knowledge is obvious and written down (Lam, 2000; Smith, 2001). Tacit knowledge instead, is rather invisible, and includes actions and pragmatic knowledge and captures information on 'how to do things well' (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Brown & Duguid, 1998; Smith, 2001). Both explicit and tacit knowledge need to be shared and both forms need to be balanced (Smith, 2001). Lam (2000) points out that despite explicit knowledge being more obvious, this does not mean it should not be managed. Tacit knowledge however, is more difficult to access and transfer as it is considered 'immobile' and stays with the knowledge holder, if it is not made explicit (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Bartol & Srivastava, 2002; Smith, 2001).

Overall, barriers to knowledge transfer can be grouped into 1) issues around the transferred knowledge, (e.g., ambiguity of information); 2) issues around the source of knowledge, (e.g., low reliability of the source, knowledge stickiness, lack of time); 3) issues around the recipient of knowledge, (e.g., a lack of motivation to absorb knowledge, lack of absorptive capacity, or problems with retention of knowledge); and 4) issues related to the context, (e.g., social, cultural context, trustworthy environment) (Spraggon & Bodolica, 2012; Szulanski, 1996; Van der Wagen & White, 2014; Yih-Tong Sun & Scott, 2005).

To better understand how knowledge is best transferred, scholars draw upon motivation theory to understand what motivates individuals, teams and organizations most in knowledge transfer. Studies found that the individual's intrinsic motivation and factors of recognition, built expertise, trust and accountability as well as reward systems are necessary (Bartol & Srivastava, 2002). Other people-bound individual drivers of knowledge transfer include personality characteristics, such as conscientiousness and openness to experience positively influenced knowledge sharing (Wang, Noe, & Wang, 2014). Further, information technology and organizational structure can positively influence knowledge transfer, as well as organizational culture (Al Saifi, 2015), and leadership (Bryant, 2003).

### ***Knowledge Transfer Processes in Event Organizations***

Research on knowledge transfer is particularly lacking for smaller events, and research on “process and actors in knowledge creation for event tourism is largely absent” (Getz, 2008, p. 419). More research is required to investigate the knowledge transfer processes in this complex organizational setting, particularly about event design and co-ordination (Pemsel & Mueller, 2012; Yeoman et al., 2012). Understanding these knowledge transfer processes is important as the work environment of event organizations is different to other industry sectors (Allen et al., 2011; Tum & Norton, 2006; Van der Wagen & White, 2010; 2014; Wrathall & Gee, 2011; Yeoman et al., 2012).

Event organizers often operate with a large amount of uncertainty as they face unpredictable operational challenges (Allen et al., 2011; Hanlon & Jago, 2004; Parent & MacIntosh, 2013; Tum & Norton, 2006; Wrathall & Gee, 2011; Yeoman et al., 2012). Systems, processes and people in event organizations are often temporary and changing (Yeoman et al., 2012). Operational practice shows that specific details such as the number of potential attendees and participants are often unknown, and

event managers and staff rely on each other's expertise and experience to manage such unstructured circumstances.

Event teams are also distinct from other organizations as they work intensively together for a specific amount of time. Parent and MacIntosh (2013, p. 224) point out that those “temporary organizations have clear timelines around which all functional and operational initiatives are strategically organized”. Hence, knowledge is generally kept inside the team and is not often passed on for future use nor evaluated after the experience of its use. For the organizational environment, it therefore can be difficult to absorb knowledge from inside the event team, as project boundaries are clearly set (Bartsch et al., 2013).

The uncertainty and unpredictable operational challenges, combined with the intensity of working together for a short and limited time, requires high levels of expertise and experience to be exchanged and transferred. To make events successful, they necessitate a strong process and subject matter knowledge on the management of their stakeholders, for example their host organization, host community or country, sponsors and the media (Allen et al., 2011; Yeoman et al., 2012). Van der Wagen and White (2010) point out that staff composition in event settings are heterogeneous in terms of their contract forms. “In the event environment [...] there is generally a handful of individuals on the planning team and a mass of paid, voluntary and contractor employees working on a temporary site for anything from a few hours to a few days” (Van der Wagen & White, 2014, p. 13). Hence, only relatively few ongoing staff are included in long-term strategic planning.

Heterogeneous team structures might pose challenges for management in general and particularly knowledge transfer (e.g., motivation to participate in the event differs). For instance, volunteers show higher levels of altruism when compared with ongoing staff (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glenn, 1990); hence, ongoing staff might more competitive and less willing to share knowledge. Further, Treuren's (2014) latest research shows that there are significant differences amongst volunteers themselves in terms of their behaviors and expectations. For example, some volunteers view their experience during the event as mostly instrumental, expecting social benefits, whereas others have clear expectations to improve their career (Treuen, 2014). Allen and Bartle reveal different expectations and motivations that impact upon volunteers' behavior and performance during the event,



such that “volunteers’ intrinsic motivation and perceptions of an autonomy-supportive work climate significantly predicted engagement” (2014, p. 36).

While acknowledging the challenges that occur through these heterogeneous team structures, event teams need to perform and work together effectively and exchange knowledge successfully. One way to approach knowledge transfer in events conceptually could be to examine those event teams as high performing project based teams (Hobday, 2000; Thiry & Deguire, 2007, Van Donk & Riezebos, 2005). Project based teams have distinct characteristics, they are more innovative, are good with coping with uncertainties and accomplishing complex tasks, especially when compared to traditionally structured firms, such as functionally or matrix structured teams or organizations (Hobday, 2000). On the other hand, project based teams are less successful in managing routine tasks, and in producing economies of scale (Hobday, 2000). Although it has been recognised that knowledge management for project based teams is distinctive (Van Donk & Riezebos, 2005), it remains unclear as to whether project based teams and organizations have advantages over traditional organizational structures in knowledge transfer. Hobday (2000) for example, claims that project based organizations are particularly good in absorbing knowledge. Whereas Thiry and Deguire (2007, p. 649) see the integration of knowledge in those short-term oriented firms/teams as rather difficult and problematic: “project-based organizations are struggling to integrate knowledge and structures and [...] projects are often viewed as ‘singular ventures’”. Table 1 highlights the distinct characteristics of event organizations that make them unique compared to traditional organizations and firms in other industry sectors.

**Table 1. Distinct Characteristics of Event Organizations**

Category	Characteristics of Event Organizations	References
<b>External work environment</b>	complex external environment uncertainty as they face unpredictable operational challenges	e.g., Allen et al., 2011; Parent & MacIntosh, 2013; Pemsel & Mueller, 2012; Tum & Norton, 2006; Wrathall & Gee, 2011; Yeoman et al., 2012.
<b>Internal work environment</b>	clear timelines around all functional and operational initiatives	e.g., Parent & MacIntosh, 2013.
<b>Dynamics of knowledge and capabilities</b>	knowledge is kept inside the team and is not often passed outside those teams absorbing of knowledge from inside the event team is difficult as project boundaries are clearly set relative high ability to innovate effective coping with uncertainty effective in accomplishing complex tasks	e.g., Bartsch et al., 2013, Hobday, 2000.
<b>Team composition</b>	heterogeneous team structures and staff composition (e.g., short-term and long-term ongoing staff) heterogeneous contract forms (e.g., paid on-going staff, paid casual staff and volunteers) varying motivation of staff (e.g., social vs. career benefits, vs. work-autonomy)	e.g., Allen & Bartle, 2014; Hanlon & Jago, 2004; Hobday, 2000; Parent & MacIntosh 2013; Van der Wagen & White, 2014.

The summary shows that event organizations are different in terms of the external and internal environment they are operating in, the dynamics of knowledge and capabilities as well as in team composition. Consequently, the distinct features of the theory of knowledge transfer in traditional firms might not apply. This paper argues then that there is a need to better understand the processes enabling knowledge transfer for event organizers, how information is stored in organizational memories, and how it is accessed in the fast-paced event environment. Thus, the two research questions arise:

***RQ 1: How do event organizers learn?***

***RQ2: What are drivers and barriers of knowledge transfer in event organizations?***

## Research Approach

The aim of this research is to provide insights into how event organizations transfer knowledge. The aim is to explore and identify drivers that foster knowledge transfer within event organizations. To address this research aim, the study adopts a qualitative approach with an underlying social-constructionist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; McAdam & McCreedy, 2000). The chosen social-constructionist view influenced ontologies, epistemologies as well as the methodology of the project. For example, we believe that knowledge transfer within event organizations is socially constructed and based on personal experiences and perceptions. Further, findings have been subjectively elicited from interactions between interview participants and researchers.

We use ‘snowball sampling strategy’, also referred to as ‘chain referral sampling’ (Brace-Govan, 2004; Noy, 2008), to recruit event organizers in managerial roles, as well as event staff (see Table 1). “*The method yields a study sample through referrals made among people who share or know or others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest*” (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 141). The rationale for choosing this sampling strategy was based on two major criteria: firstly, as prior research suggests snowball sampling is appropriate when the research requires access to insiders and participants originate from a relatively small sample size compared to the overall population; and secondly, when potential participants are geographically dispersed (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Heckathorn, 2011).

Both criteria applied to this research as the research design required gaining access to insiders who could provide a deep understanding of how knowledge is transferred in event organizations. The study mainly focussed on small to mid-sized event organizations. The sample included paid event staff, volunteers, and retirees who were interviewed over a geographically broad area and were overall a rather difficult to reach population. Participants were selected to ensure different levels of experience and responsibility, as well as demographic diversity, to allow multiple perspectives and social stances to be captured.

Interviews were conducted from February until April 2014 and commenced with the convenience selection of event organizers/managers. This is because it was deemed beneficial to start

with senior experts and top managers as they can best explicate the processes. The commencement with a convenience sample was necessary “because if a random sample could be drawn, the population would not qualify as hidden” (Heckathorn, 2011, p. 356). Interviewees were encouraged to access their social and professional networks to steer the sampling process (Noy, 2008). Interviews had an average length of 60 minutes and were conducted in person, or via Skype video call. A semi-structured interview guide was used. To enhance the instrument’s quality, the interview guide was peer-reviewed and further adapted.

**Table 2. Participants**

<b>Interview No.</b>	<b>Role relevant for this research</b>	<b>Other professional roles</b>	<b>Level of experience<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Gender</b>
1	Event volunteer staff	Student	low	female
2	Event volunteer staff	Retiree	high	female
3	Event volunteer manager	Retiree	high	male
4	Event volunteer manager	Public servant	high	female
5	Event volunteer staff	Professional role includes event organisation	low	female
6	Event volunteer manager	Professional job in the event sector	high	female
7	Event volunteer manager	Retiree	high	male
8	Professional event manager	Small business owner, private sector, business operation includes event organisation	high	male
9	Event volunteer manager	Public servant	high	female
10	Professional event manager	Professional role	high	female
11	Professional event manager	Professional role	high	female
12	Event volunteer staff	Retiree	high	male
13	Event volunteer manager	Small business owner	high	female
14	Professional event manager	Event business manager	high	male
15	Event volunteer staff	Student	low	female
16	Event volunteer staff	Professional role	medium	female

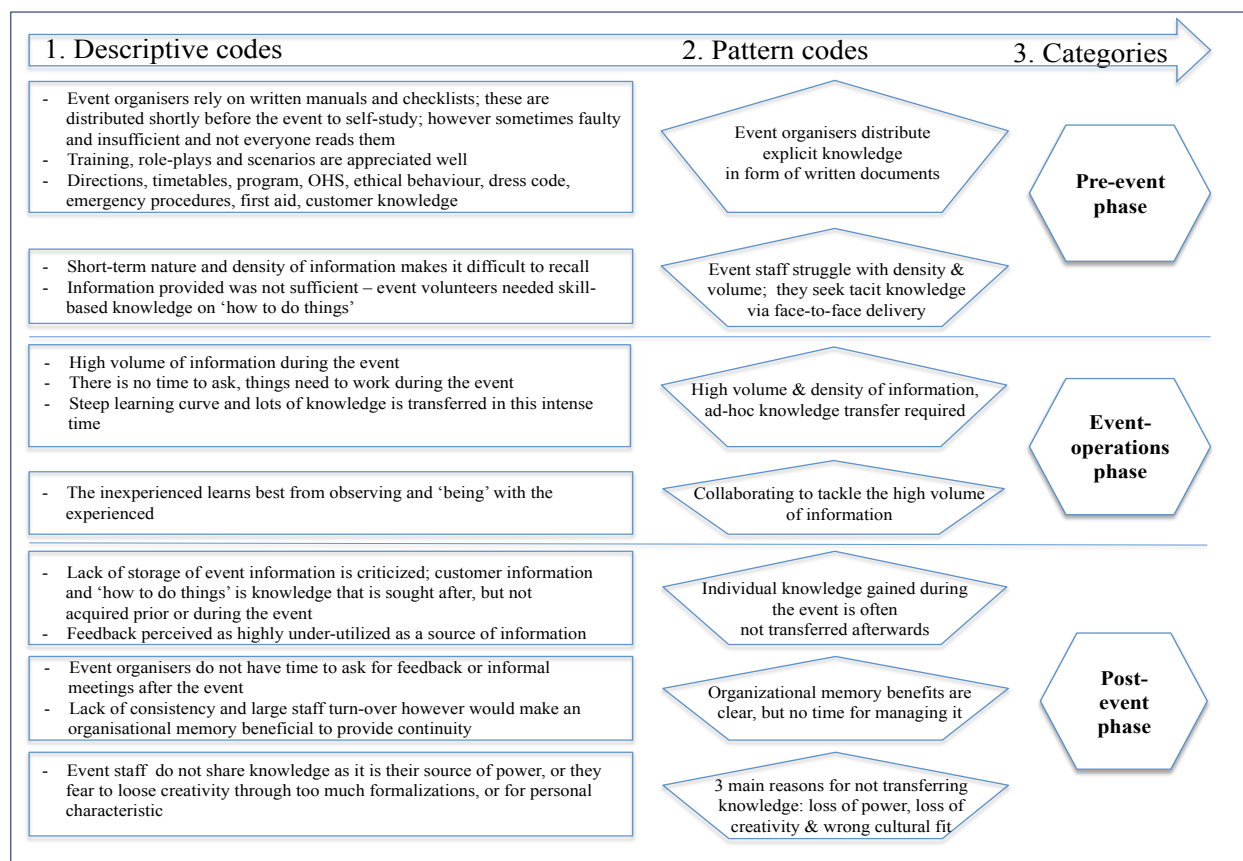
<sup>1</sup>Experience levels: *low*: 1-5 events or less than 1 year experience; *medium*: multiple events or 1-5 years of event experience; *high*: continuous or more than 5 years of event experience.

Table 2 illustrates the participants, categorised per their level of experience. This categorisation is important due to the relationship between the level of work experience and

knowledge transfer (e.g., Reagans, Argote, & Brooks, 2005). Given that most the participants had a reasonably high level of work experience, we assume that the amount of knowledge available for transfer is relatively high.

Empirical data were transcribed and analysed using an inductive approach to coding aligned to Basit's (2003) and Huberman and Miles' (2002) qualitative data analysis procedures. In the first step words and phrases from the interview data were labeled (Basit, 2003) to generate descriptive codes (Huberman & Miles, 2002). In the second step the authors conducted a workshop to discuss how the descriptive codes could be interpreted and grouped into pattern codes (Huberman & Miles, 2002). Finally, those interpretive patterns were further consolidated into three overall categories (Basit, 2003). The interviews were undertaken until there was a level of saturation of material and no new information was being obtained (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). *Figure 1* provides an overview on the relationships between the descriptive codes, resulting interpretive pattern codes and overarching categories: i) *pre-event*, ii) *event-operations* and iii) *post-event*.

Figure 1. Summary of Data Structure



## Results

The aim of this study is to understand how event organizations transfer knowledge and to identify characteristics that foster knowledge transfer. The results show that knowledge transfer in event organizations can be categorised into three phases: i) *pre-event*, ii) *event-operations* and iii) *post-event* (see Figure 1). Each phase shows distinct characteristics that determine knowledge transfer. The type of knowledge that is transferred and available varies for each phase. In the *pre-event* preparation phase organizers focus on distributing abundant written operations related information, such as checklists, manuals on behavior, direction and maps, and what to do in certain emergencies. During the *event-operations* phase event staff require ad-hoc information and rapid knowledge transfer. Whereas in the *post-event* phase there is time to reflect and share experiences; however, the strategic opportunity to access individuals' knowledge and store it is often missed by event organizers. The analysis of knowledge transfer in the *post-event* phase showed clearly that there is a need for greater managerial focus on accessing and storing knowledge – and on making it re-accessible before the next event commences. The following section presents the detailed results and interprets the findings for each of the three different phases.

### ***Knowledge Transfer – Pre-event phase***

Knowledge transfer between event organizers and event staff commenced around six months prior to the event. Most event organizers provided written documentation such as manuals and checklists prior to the event while some organizers conducted training and included role-plays and scenarios. The knowledge that appears to be important at this stage is explicit knowledge such as technical information on directions and timetables.

Research participants experienced various issues with the ways written information was transferred. For example, not all event staff – who were mostly volunteers – were provided with information. Participants reported that although staff received information, they did not read the provided manuals beforehand and often attended the event unprepared as not all the staff members had time to attend prior meetings. This was particularly due to the short-term nature of events where some event volunteers joined just days before the event began.

*My first year [as a volunteer staff] was a nightmare, with no training, and no time to prepare (event volunteer manager).*

*When I arrived here, I was given no information ... I have now developed a manual for each volunteer I supervise (event volunteer manager).*

In those cases, where information provision and training prior to the event were sparse and rudimentary, the operation later faced a number of constraints. However, there was also sympathy of event co-ordinators for the imperfect transfer of knowledge. One event volunteer co-ordinator explained that dealing with complexity, density of information and unexpected issues is the nature of event management.

*Constraints need to be taken into account. This is the nature of volunteering, they have one hour of training. No further development, this is where I need to pick them up (event volunteer manager).*

Forms of information and knowledge that were taught and transferred included directions, timetables, program information as well as customer knowledge, first aid information, appropriate dress codes, disciplinary information, occupational health and safety, as well as:

*... ethical behavior in relation to money, what to do with problems, how to manage anxieties for first time, younger volunteers (event volunteer manager).*

Knowledge that was sought after, particularly by inexperienced event staff, included the information on the development of particular skill sets that help with challenges on ‘*how to manage stress*’ and ‘*how to react in emergency situations*’, ‘*how to manage difficult event visitors*’, and ‘*how to work out group and team conflict*’ (event volunteer staff, low level of experience).

*Normal problem resolution skills, and passing on those skills is important, customer service and openness (event volunteer staff, low level of experience).*

*Training is delivered to volunteers: lots of subject matter knowledge is trained, but this is certainly not enough, volunteers need to do their own research and the delivered information is just the start – but certainly insufficient (event volunteer staff, high level of experience).*

Overall, it became obvious that event organizers relied highly on written documents and explicit knowledge through manuals and checklists. These were mostly used and made available to all event staff, however participants reported that information was sometimes out-dated or entirely missing, and in some cases, different information was made available for volunteer and paid event staff. Results also clearly indicated that event staff were more interested in face-to-face training or role-play for pre-event knowledge transfer, than in reading the provided manuals and checklists.

### ***Knowledge Transfer – Event-operations phase***

The main challenge for research participants in terms of knowledge transfer during the event was the high volumes of information that needed to be communicated and processed in a very short period of time. Information was transferred ad hoc, and a strong reliance on verbal communication became evident.

*Very steep learning curve the first time, exciting and anxious, very intense, no time to ask question at the actual event (event volunteer staff, low level of experience).*

*During the event, things need to work, volunteers need to know where to get immediate information from (event volunteer manager).*

Some events used modern communication technology such as talk-back radio, walkie-talkies, and most of the event organizers found it useful to pair up inexperienced and experienced event staff, to best exchange information. The inexperienced learnt “by observation” (experienced event volunteer) and there appeared to be a strong reliance on tacit knowledge. There was little evidence, however, that this tacit knowledge became explicit. One rather inexperienced event volunteer reported that two-way radio served well as a synchronous communication means and found it to be very effective, as it had the advantage that all listeners were included passively into the conversations.



### ***Knowledge Transfer – Post-event phase***

There was a lot of criticism on how event organizers managed knowledge transfer in the post-event phase. Event staff and volunteers reported that event organizations often missed out on the opportunity to access the individual knowledge that they acquired and created during the event. Most participants felt that feedback and post-event reflections were lacking. Participants felt that informal feedback shared through social gatherings would have been more useful compared to formally collected feedback. Volunteers even perceived that if they were able to provide informal feedback to event. Experienced volunteers would see the invitation to provide feedback as a form of recognition. However, informal and unstructured feedback and conversations rarely occurred.

In terms of data storage, suggestions of the type of information that would be worthwhile storing in an organizational memory were wide ranging: past volunteer experiences, customer feedback, how to react in certain situations, how to deal with anxieties, and how to respond in critical situations were just some of the recommendations. Most participants in volunteer co-ordinator and leadership roles believed that it was highly important to gain feedback and to evaluate and store relevant information, to learn and make use of this information at future events. However, this mostly tacit, experience-based knowledge was rarely mobilized and neither transferred, nor stored.

For those few event organizers who did store information, some form of electronic database was considered most useful. One event firm used photos from previous events to show new staff/volunteers to help them visualise event operations.

*Online media – the drop box changed how the team worked; being tech savvy, electronic time sheets (event volunteer manager).*

Only two interviewees reported that the event organizers would mix modern technologies and face-to-face channels throughout the phases. Multiple channels had the advantage of being more inclusive of the heterogeneous group of volunteers, and enabling the acquisition of, and access to, knowledge and information quickly.

Most research participants found that data storage has been largely underutilized. Reasons as to why organizational memories were not implemented can be categorized into two major motives: little awareness by professional event organizers that information needs to be accessed and stored, and the lack of perceived rewards for storing knowledge by event volunteers.

Most event managers were critical of their non-existent storage of knowledge. Although they indicated that it would be beneficial if information was collected, stored and made available for future access, the clear majority did not have a database of comprehensive material that included more than checklists, manuals and address details. The main reason given for this lack of knowledge storage was stated as the scarcity of time during operational phases. However, storage of information was regarded as particularly important as events were regarded as lacking in consistency.

*We haven't managed the knowledge transfer process well – when people leave, the knowledge goes with them (professional event manager).*

*I experienced low intention to share work. Often it was left with one person. It is a very vulnerable point, as knowledge is not recorded, and often sits with only one person. The power of the knowledge holder becomes great and therefore problematic. When this person leaves, the whole knowledge is gone (event volunteer manager).*

Turning to the event staff perspective, that data showed that participating event staff were very heterogeneous in terms of contract form, age, experience, and motivation to share knowledge. For example, younger and inexperienced volunteers criticised senior volunteers for being complacent to acquire new knowledge, and their lack of willingness to learn. In turn senior, more experienced volunteers pointed out that to be successful, experience is essential and experience becomes more important than the rules and guidelines that are distributed by event organizers. An experienced event co-ordinator stated there was difficulty in “*trying to standardise behaviour*” whilst “*having access to a lot of creativity*” (event volunteer manager).

Further relevant statements included:

*First when young they want to be 'safe' and do exactly what they do. When they become older, they become more relaxed. Relaxedness comes from experience (event volunteer staff, high level of experience).*

*It needs time to understand, a few years of experience are necessary (event volunteer staff, high level of experience).*

In turn, a full-time ongoing event manager and younger volunteers criticised the complacency of senior experienced volunteer staff to learn and adopt new practices.

*The longer people are here, the more complacent they are about the knowledge they have (professional event manager).*

*The most problematic volunteers for us are those in their 40's...they think they know everything and will not follow any instructions (event volunteer staff, low level of experience).*

Some research participants related the differences in willingness to share information to their underlying motivation, which mostly was “to get free entry and secondly to socialise” (event volunteer manager), and those volunteers who just want to be entertained and socialise may not pass on knowledge.

Event co-ordinators or staff who had been involved in the event for longer times obtained most of the knowledge. This knowledge placed them in powerful positions. Event co-ordinators, however, also recognised that this can make it difficult for volunteers to articulate problems – due to issues around power differences between themselves and paid staff.

*Knowledge is power, don't lose power; this is what some volunteers think (event volunteer manager).*

One participant stated that storing knowledge by the event organizers, and making use of this information at the next event goes against the main motivation of volunteers to work at an event which is being creative and exploring oneself.

*It is good that there is no [organizational memory] as it prevents from being creative, making mistakes and exploring new things; storage of information would also done by supervisors, who do not hold the important knowledge anyway (event volunteer staff, high level of experience).*

## **Discussion**

We found that three distinct phases in the knowledge transfer process and needs and effectiveness of knowledge transfer practices differ over the time of the process. From this finding, several issues emerge suggesting knowledge transfer in event organizations has different drivers and challenges for each phase of the event cycle. In the *pre-event* phase organizers distributed mainly written documents, filled with explicit knowledge. Event staff perceived the provided information as complex and overly dense. Issues with the transfer process included the inclusion of dated and irrelevant data.

Additionally, not all staff had access to the documents provided. Due to the short-term nature and density of the information, event staff would have preferred the inclusion of face-to-face briefings on ‘how to do things’. Event staff often sought experienced-based tacit knowledge. The obvious challenge for event managers is making tacit and experience-based knowledge mobile and accessible. Tacit knowledge is more difficult to transfer as it is considered ‘immobile’ and it takes a managerial effort to be made explicit (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Bartol & Srivastava, 2002; Smith, 2001). Event staff suggestions for event managers on ways to make tacit knowledge accessible in the *pre-event phase* included preparing role-plays and scenarios. Recommendations for event managers to enhance knowledge transfer could include role-plays, where specific customer-oriented skill sets training was offered.

Further, because of the heterogeneity of event teams, the learning needs of individual team members vary. Event managers need consider different levels of learning (e.g., Argote et al., 2000), and differences in motivation which is influencing the willingness to knowledge transfer varies between staff. Paid casual staff and volunteers for example have different expectations in relation to working at an event. There were also generational differences in volunteers' motivations; for example, social vs. career benefits, while others may be driven by work-autonomy (Allen & Bartle, 2014; Treuen, 2014). Consequently, as strategic implications for event managers it is necessary to be aware of the heterogeneity and different learning needs of all event staff: senior experienced volunteers prefer informal, socially oriented knowledge transfer in group settings, whereas younger casual event staff pursuing career goals by joining the event preferred structured briefing sessions prior to the event.

Further on, the second, *event-operations* phase provided a challenge in that even more knowledge needed to be transferred and acquired by event staff in a very short period of time: usually no more than a few days. The high volume of information required in this phase and the fast-paced nature of event operations hardly allows time to reflect and ask for new information. Overall, participants believed that during this phase knowledge was transferred effectively. The key driver of knowledge transfer during this phase was the creation of teams of experienced and less experienced event staff. Newcomers contributed with their acquired explicit knowledge, and benefitted greatly from the past experiences and practices of experienced staff. In addition, synchronous communication tools such as two-way radios assisted in transferring information between large groups. To foster knowledge transfer in this second phase quick transfer of knowledge is necessary. Teece (2000) for example, recommends that time advantages can be achieved through the usage of electronic data, shallow hierarchies, self-managed decision-making and an overall innovative culture.

The final, *post-event* phase revealed that event organizers showed little strategic activity when planning knowledge transfer. The major finding in this phase was the lack of awareness of the importance of an organizational memory. Our data analysis showed that event organizers particularly miss out on the opportunity to access and store event staffs' individual tacit knowledge. Although there is recognition that there ideally should be storage of knowledge in form of organizational memory, it is mostly non-existent. Based on the findings of literature, organizational memory is the output of successful knowledge transfer process, and positive effects include facilitating decision-

making (Rowlinson et al., 2010), fostering competence building (Borgatti & Carboni, 2007) and transforming organizations in the change process (Argote, 2013; Argyris, 1999; Daft & Weick, 1984).

Thus, the creation of a retention facility and the storage of experiences, beliefs, routines and tangible artefacts, stories, and shared perceptions of ‘the way things are done around here’ would substantially benefit event organizations (Levitt & March, 1988; Moorman & Miner, 1998; Walsh & Ungson, 1991). Specific recommendations to establish organisational memory for event managers include activities to access individual knowledge and obtain relevant data from experiences and practices such as informal meetings as well as reflective discussions and feedback conversations after the event. At the same time, it will be necessary for event managers to be held accountable to provide evidence of the establishment and management of an organizational memory.

The accountability of event managers is necessary, as lack of storage of information gained *during the event* phase is likely to result in knowledge gaps and missed learning opportunities. Although in our study, event organizers partly acknowledged the importance of these activities, it was mainly the shortage of time that hindered implementation of a strategy to construct an organizational memory. Overall, there appeared to be little evidence gaining feedback from event staff following the event. This implies that the event organizations in this study instead fall back on tactical and strategic activities that have worked in the past, rather than learning from the event. We also conclude that effectiveness of knowledge transfer practices are time-bound, e.g. social events to mobilise tacit knowledge, and, for instance, digitising knowledge in form of video or pictures is proposed as useful in creating and organizational memory, after the event has occurred.

Overall, the study showed that participants were aware of the specific complex and fast-moving event environment. These findings align to those characteristics described in the literature, as a large amount of uncertainty, and unpredictable operational challenges (Allen et al., 2011; Tum & Norton, 2006; Wrathall & Gee, 2011; Yeoman et al., 2012). Thus, findings confirm that successful knowledge transfer in events has context specific characteristics: high volumes of information need to be transferred and absorbed in very short time. Findings show that the requirements for managers and staff to quickly transfer high amounts of knowledge, was higher compared to their other roles outside the event sector. Further, we found, that the distinct fast-paced nature of events – the ‘speed’ of event operations and with this, the quick and dense knowledge transfer – is attractive and a driving

factor to participate and work in the event sector. The literature suggests that, for events operations to be successful, a strong process and subject matter knowledge on the management of their stakeholders is needed (Allen et al., 2011; Yeoman et al., 2012). Our findings indicate that it is furthermore necessary to put strong emphasis on transferring tacit knowledge. Results revealed that there are two ways that transferred tacit knowledge best: firstly, the pairing of inexperienced with experienced event staff and secondly, to utilise synchronous communication channels, examples included two-way radio.

The lack of conversion of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge appeared to be a great source of frustration for participants. The barriers to knowledge transfer as discussed by Szulanski (1996) are pertinent here. Our data showed that information ambiguity, the reliability of the source – “the longer people are here, the more complacent they are about the knowledge they have” and knowledge stickiness – “I experienced low intention to share work” all play a part in the lack of knowledge transfer, especially for tacit knowledge. Bartsch et al. (2013) and Hobday (2000) previously suggested that knowledge in temporary event organizations is difficult to absorb and clear project boundaries function as barriers to knowledge transfer beyond those boundaries. Our findings confirm this difficulty to absorb knowledge for the second phase – the actual *event-operations* phase of the event. However, we also uncovered that there is time and effective tools, such informal feedback meetings, digital communication channels, to tackle the problem that 1) too much information needs to be absorbed in a short period of time and to overcome 2) the issue of transferring tacit knowledge in the phases before, and particularly after the event.

In addition to those organizational-level findings on knowledge transfer processes, results also revealed barriers of knowledge transfer embedded in individual-level behavior and attitude. For some participants, the willingness to share information was limited. They indicated losing power when sharing experiences or practices that worked well. The crucial motivational factor for volunteers – to be creative and to explore themselves – was perceived to stand against the storage of knowledge. Some volunteers feared that information might become standardised and not leave room for creative behavior. Although research found that heterogeneous teams are beneficial for the organization’s innovation (Bartsch et al., 2013; Hobday, 2000), there are issues with staff having different commitments and contract forms (e.g., paid on-going staff, paid casual staff and volunteers). Coming

from this, heterogeneous motivations emerge, making it challenging for event managers to encourage knowledge transfer.

## **Contribution, Limitations and Further Research**

The paper revealed processes that foster knowledge transfer within event organizers, how information is stored in organizational memories, and accessed in the fast-paced event environment. Findings suggest that event organizers transfer knowledge differently compared to traditional organizations. First, context-specific features such as the complex unpredictable, fast-paced environment and the density of information are challenges for knowledge transfer in event organizations. Second, we showed that transfer of explicit knowledge occurs during the *pre-event* phase whilst tacit knowledge is needed during the *event-operations*.

Tacit knowledge however, is rarely converted into explicit knowledge in the *post-event* phase. Therefore, timing of knowledge transfer practices is relevant. Third, results show that event teams are heterogeneous in terms of different contract forms (e.g., paid on-going staff, paid casual staff and volunteers), levels of experience of working on events, and age groups. Those distinctions impacted on motivation of knowledge transfer. For instance, senior and retired volunteers seek self-fulfilment, social benefits and work autonomy, whereas younger casual staff were seeking work experience, social learning and generic skills, as well as career benefits. Consequently, the willingness and motivation to transfer and absorb knowledge was higher for younger staff. However, senior volunteers expressed that within post event functions, in a social informal setting, there were most willing to share their experiences.

Creating and accessing an organizational memory would highly benefit event operations for several reasons. Access to information would enable better human resource management in, for example, succession planning, and recruiting. Further, data storage would enable higher consistency in quality operations as new event staff would be able to better learn from prior experiences. Further explicit knowledge could be transferred in role-plays and experienced in training sessions. Finally,



findings suggest that knowledge transfer between event organizers and event staff can be distinguished into three phases: i) *pre-event*, ii) *event-operations* and iii) *post-event*.

From these findings, practical implications can be drawn. Event managers could take advantage of the finding that knowledge transfer is different for each phase in the event process; and that each phase has its own potential for knowledge transfer:

i) *Knowledge transfer in the pre-event phase*: to reduce complexity and density of information and mobilize tacit, experience-based knowledge, face-to-face meetings are an effective addition to integrate all different levels of experiences and motivation. These group activities would be in addition to check-lists, manuals and other formal procedural written-down data.

ii) *Knowledge transfer in the event-operations phase*: during the fast-paced event operations, team building between experienced and inexperienced event staff and volunteers is beneficial, together with synchronous communication devices, for example two-way radio and synchronous tools of social media. Self-managed teams and shallow hierarchies could further improve knowledge transfer and event operations.

iii) *Knowledge transfer in the post-event phase*: this phase has the highest potential for event managers in terms of strategic knowledge management. As organizational memory is largely underutilized, an effort to mobilize and store information, particularly tacit knowledge acquired during the event, is necessary here. For example, debriefing events in formal social settings would be helpful. Capturing and storing of experiences could be conducted via videos and written-down stories.

The paper contributes theoretically to the existing research gap in strategic event management research (Fredline et al., 2013; Getz, 2008; Mair & Whitford, 2013; Pemsel & Mueller, 2012; Yeoman et al., 2012). Findings add to the understanding of the distinct knowledge transfer processes and challenges of events organizations from a strategic and organizational perspective. The findings advance theory in showing that event organizations need to integrate different actors (volunteers, event managers, casual and fixed term staff) with different motivations to share their knowledge. Literature has questioned if project-based organizations have advantages over traditionally structured organizations, in terms of their knowledge transfer (Hobday, 2000; Thiry & Deguire, 2007). There

are some distinct challenges, however there is great potential to enhance strategic knowledge management for those heterogeneous teams and fast-paced settings. Further, this paper is one of the first studies to explore the concept of organizational memory and its relevance for event management.

This study, however, was limited in the type of the sampling process used – snowballing – as well as the type of event organizations – small to medium sized events. However, for this research snowball sampling provided several advantages. The snowball sampling strategy enabled access to event management insiders, such as event managers, volunteer retirees, volunteer students; accessing their networks over a geographically dispersed area in Australia. However, we acknowledge that accessing the respondents’ social and professional networks might create an effect of accessing only those participants who are willing to take part in the study. Thus, the snowball approach may bias the sample by providing like-minded responses (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Handcock & Gile, 2011; Noy, 2008); for example, in the present study this has led to a higher number of female event research participants.

Future research would benefit from a quantitative research approach. For example, a stratified sample of events would provide the opportunity to compare whether there were substantial differences in the knowledge transfer processes for large events such as the Olympics and smaller community types of event. Future research could also explore underlying processes that influence knowledge transfer behaviour within heterogeneous event teams; studies could also investigate how volunteers are best integrated and managed for them to contribute effectively to knowledge transfer. This avenue might address a significant gap in event volunteer research, as “although definitions from the literature emphasize free will, lack of financial gain, and benefit to others, they do not consider how volunteers might integrate, negotiate, or reject these meanings when the demands of freedom and contribution collide” (McAllum, 2014, p. 84).

## Conclusion

This study explores knowledge transfer processes within small to medium sized event organizations. Findings show that knowledge transfer in event organizations has different drivers and challenges for each phase of the event cycle. *Pre-event*, written explicit knowledge is provided. However, for the short-term nature and density of knowledge to be acquired, event staff prefer tacit skill-based information and to learn from prior experiences via face-to-face delivery. During the *event-operations*, there is little time to transfer knowledge; teaming-up experienced with unexperienced event staff appeared to work best.

Event organizations are most lacking in managing knowledge transfer in the *post-event phase*. Establishing and managing storage of knowledge and organizational memory would highly benefit event operations. Both tacit and explicit knowledge can be accessed through feedback sessions from volunteers, for example in informal get-togethers after the event with event managers and event staff, or face-to-face interviews. The benefits of an organizational memory are that it would improve data-quality and data-relevance before the event, and maintain consistency and quality in operations.

The strongest impact however, might occur on a strategic long-term level, enabling the storage of relevant factual data, as well as experiences and feedback from event staff. Implementing and actively managing the organizational memory can be created as the result of the organization's learning process; it is the place where information is stored until it is retrieved and transformed. We conclude with prior literature, for the context of event organisations, that the awareness of the significance of knowledge transfer and the strategic management of the organizational memory are essential, since it influences the firm's success (Chang & Cho, 2008; Rowlinson et al., 2010; Walsh & Ungson, 1991). Above all, we suggest event organisations will operate more effectively, when better managing knowledge transfer between the heterogeneous staff including paid on-going staff, paid casual staff and event volunteers.

In conclusion, the results show that knowledge management in event organizations largely focuses on the exchange of operational information, and the quality and quantity of this knowledge transfer varies considerably. Tacit knowledge evolves during the event, but is often remained hidden

and stuck with the knowledge holder. Understanding this, event managers however, can now actively manage transfer of knowledge. The barrier of heterogeneity in staff's motivation to share information could be overcome through the implementation of organizational memory and storing of information that individuals can share. Strategically planning and getting access to event volunteers' tacit and experience-based knowledge by means of follow-up meetings or post-event conversations, organized by professional event staff, is highly recommended.

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